

Dibaajimowin 3: Presence within the Land

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<http://dibaajimowin.wordpress.com/presence>

Podcast Transcript

One of the most important aspects of decolonization is exercising our relationships with the land (Monture-Angus 1999, 35). Indeed, the imperial project sought to sever our connection to our lands, using colonialism and its concomitant outposts, racist rhetoric and self-serving economic interests as the means by which Europe gained its power off the backs of our peoples. The legacies continue today: private property ownership, police- and, at times, military-enforced occupation of Indigenous lands, “legalized” expropriation of territories and outright fraudulent treaties all entrench colonial control of our lands, telling us it is not safe to fulfill our responsibilities to the beings, sacred places and ecologies that give us knowledges, languages and identities. Within such a colonial context, connecting to the land is a form of resistance, and also provides opportunities for strengthening Anishinabe-inaadiziwin that comes from understanding and participating in such relationships in ways that promotes balance.

However, within a colonial context going to the lands to which we are accountable to, or with which we must fulfill our responsibilities and relationships, means that we will inevitably bump up with the state and its law enforcement apparatus. I see this as a clash between two ways to conceptualize human relationships to land: Anishinabek have a relationship to land that requires renewal; settler society as it historically exists today is predicated on dominating, and maintaining dominance

over the lands. To reconnect with those lands, we are forced to subvert this dominance.

This is exactly what happened on May 17 of this year within the context of this Community Governance Project. I went with a group of people to collect leeks from a site in Nishnaabeg territory, which was located off-reserve. The leeks are right for harvesting in late spring, and there are only certain sites that support their habitat. In some cases, habitat has been completely destroyed; in other cases, access to habitat is simply blocked by private property owners. However, in the case of the leeks we were after that day, the road to the site was blocked by municipal workers from a local town, as they were clearing the brush along the roadside. There was a sign on the road that said "Road Closed, Local Traffic Only." No one was there, and we guessed that the workers were off for lunch. So we proceeded around the sign and picked leeks in a place that Gitigaa-Migize has been going to for decades.

However, as we were picking leeks, a truck of municipal workers drove by slowly, looking at us, and the workers were mumbling something about us being there. On the way out, we passed the machinery that was now busily clearing the brush - it moved out of our way so we could pass. But when we got to where the 'road closed' sign was placed, the road was now completely blocked with pylons and the lead municipal worker himself. When he saw us, he hopped out of the truck and came towards the driver's side of the car to speak to Gitigaa-Migize.

"Can't you read?" demanded the worker, referring to the sign.

What ensued was an exchange that evolved around the worker needing to assert his dominance and authority over the situation, over our presence as Anishinabek connecting with the land. In the end, Gitigaa-Migize handled the municipal worker's attack and got us out of there with the leeks we came for. But the experience brought up many discussions about what had happened and about what, if anything, should be done about it. How could we address similar situations in the future? Did anything need to change?

I had many conversations about this incident with Gitigaa-Migize over the subsequent months. We discussed whether he handled the municipal worker's attack in the best way; we discussed how the worker asserted his colonial privilege over us, and how that made us feel. It was clear that exercising our relationships with the land or, in other words, simply living as Anishinabek, is a criminal action in a colonial context that still actively asserts its control over Anishinabek in order to control the land. Our very presence destabilizes colonial authority, causing it to lash out in an attempt to re-assert dominance.

This led to further discussions about strategies for actively making ourselves present on the land. Part of this strategy is to understand how settler society tries to justify its control over us by blaming Nishnaabeg for resource depletion historically caused by settlers themselves. For example, drawing on historical documents, Gitigaa-Migize wrote an entry for his community's newsletter in June, showing that it was not Nishnaabeg that depleted salmon and whitefish populations in the Great Lakes, but the out of control harvesting practices of settler society, sometimes using hundreds of thousands of fish to fertilize and manure farm lands

(Gitigaa-Migize 2011). But he does not end there: he supports resistance by writing that:

Despite the governments' use of game wardens and the courts to harass us, we continue to practice living as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabe on the land. We still hold gatherings, and we still go hunting and fishing. I admire this resistance as it shows a deep rooted desire to protect our identity as a distinct people who know that this territory was gifted to us by the Creator. (Gitigaa-Migize 2011)

This article and the discussions we had about not buckling to colonial authority when we are living an Anishinabe lifestyle informed a broader discussion about what to do when the enforcers of such authority arrest or charge us for practicing Anishinabe ways. For example, should Anishinabek, whether recognized as Status Indians or not, pay fines for "fishing out of season"? Maybe it is time to challenge these fines to reclaim the right to fish as a recognized right for Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg - a right taken from them in the 1923 Williams Treaty.¹

This notion of balancing Anishinabe ways with the colonial context is key to our resurgence and resistance. Drawing again on the incident with the municipal worker, Waaseya'sin, a person with the core group of people that works with Gitigaa-Migize more permanently, discussed with me the need to be realistic about the threats we face when living an Anishinabek lifestyle in the neocolonial context as well as the need to foster healthy anti-colonial behaviours and thinking within our youth and children. We sat together one day at Gitigaa-Migize's house, where she conceptualized Anishinabek anti-colonial work in this way:

¹ Gitigaa-Migize. Waawshkigaamagki. 10 June 2011.

And I wonder about this too, around this decolonization. And I've had to spend a lot of conceptualizing it and understanding it for myself because it was making me crazy 'cause I felt like I had to always be anti-, anti-, anti-; and fighting, fighting, fighting. But that's going to kill me, and I don't want my kid seeing that - my girl seeing that - 'cause that's not how, Creation didn't bring us here to do that, right? We're here to be happy, experience joy, experience this physical world. So, for me it's just following that natural impulse of all these, doing this, right? Like making this [sugar] shack, and just going and going, going. And then when we come against those points of colonization or colonialism or neocolonialism, such as the municipal work, right, or the conservation officer, that's when we have to, when I feel, for me, I've developed this skill, this ability, to be anti-colonial, and to speak out. And to be a person I don't always like to be; I don't like to be assertive, and pushy, and speak back. I don't like to be afraid. You know, I don't like to have a negative thought in my mind around that person is here to harm me, or that person has erased me and my daughter. But, as soon as I recognize that in that municipal officer, I feel compelled to speak against that, and do something that might not be recognizable as Nishnaabe, but *is* Nishnaabe because we're in a colonial context and we have to be that way now. Right? And we have to consider everything, because our kids are always with us, right?²

What I like about Waaseya'sin's words is that she demonstrates resurgence and resistance can be exactly the same thing. Collecting leeks brings us to the land,

² Waaseya'sin. Waawshkigaamagki. 17 June 2011.

engages us in our relationships with those medicines and, in this case, positioned us to address colonial authority face to face. I would say that this is probably the case for most non-reserve lands in what is currently Canada. Key for me, however, was that this experience provided an opportunity to evaluate myself even further, as I didn't immediately feel like fighting that municipal worker - I felt like I didn't know what to do rather than act within a strong sense of being Anishinabe in that moment. This opened me up for a resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin to emerge within me, which ultimately made me realize that decolonization is not a lofty goal, but, rather, it is something I must live every day by embodying Anishinabe-inaadiziwin in my behaviour. I discuss this more in the written analysis located under this podcast on this blog site.

Analysis: Presence as Resistance

The relationships we have with our territories is possibly the most powerful driving force behind our resistance to colonialism in the contemporary context. Going beyond imposed “reservation boundaries”, we hold relationships with the beings in our territories that, though currently occupied by settler society, have always provided Anishinabek with everything we need to flourish. Today, this relationship proves imperative, as we not only have survived the harshest government-led extermination attempts, but we are now beginning to flourish as a nation again (e.g. Betasamosake 2008). In this time of resurgence, renewing our relationships with our lands provides both an opportunity to reclaim knowledges that have been taken from us as an intentional result of the colonial project, and an imperative to restrengthen our identities in the face of historical and on-going attempted erasure of Anishinabek identity.

In this short analysis, I explore how the relationships we hold within Anishinabewaki (Anishinabe country)³ provide a foundation for (inevitable) resistance and resurgence within a continuing colonial context. Our presence in our lands unfolds a type of sovereignty that is based in responsibilities: we do not dominate those lands but hold responsibilities to them that must be fulfilled. Going to our lands is the basis for fulfilling those responsibilities, but in the current context where land is controlled by settler society, going to our lands means we must face the risks of being harassed by the state’s law enforcement apparatus. It is thus here that resistance and resurgence collapse, as the act of reconnecting with our lands constitutes a resurgence of our relationships that, at times, also

³ Geniusz 2009, 191.

manifests direct resistance to colonial power when we face agents of law enforcement or settlers that demand recognition of the privileges given to them by the state's imposed legal framework.

In exploring the intersections of presence, resistance and resurgence, it might first be useful to explore the Anishinabe teaching of *gidakiiminaan*. A word used in the northwest of our territory, *gidakiiminaan* has been translated to English as "the experience of knowing and understanding the relationships that exist throughout Creation, and understanding your own role and responsibility in this relationship" (Seven Generations Education Institute n.d.,12). When I spoke to Gitigaa-Migize about this word, he said he would use the word *gi-daa-aki-di-bimaadiziwin* to describe the knowledge and responsibilities needed to live well within a place.⁴ Embodying these teachings means that the knowledge we hold about how to live well with the land informs our behaviour, which ultimately manifests my identity (Seven Generations Education Institute n.d.,12). It requires that we be present in the land. Knowing the land shapes who I am: I manifest the energy and knowledge within it.

However, within a colonial context it is difficult to know our lands in the way we need to (Monture-Angus 1999, 36). We are placed on reservations and told that all land beyond the reserve border is now private land or crown land, no longer alive but a resource for settler society to consume in a variety of ways. As Betasamosake (2011) has noted, this Eurocentric understanding of land, which prioritizes consumption, is built on the concept of absence, because consumption

⁴ Gitigaa-Migize. Waawshkigaamagki. 15 June 2011.

cannot be justified if people do not first feel an absence within their lives (92-3). Conversely, she notes that Nishnaabeg society is a culture of presence (92), and this is infused into how we come to know the world and live within it. Presencing, then, is a decolonizing project that fits within the teaching of *gidakiiminaan* because not only do we have a responsibility to be present on the land, we also have a responsibility to resist existing and expanding colonial control/domination of our territories.

The responsibility to be present in our territories establishes and maintains our identities as Anishinabek. Engaging with the lands, whether by hunting, trapping, collecting medicines, etc., results in the knowledge that informs how we act, our legal traditions (Borrows 2002), our political systems (Benton-Benai 1988) and our identities (Deloria 1998). While explaining these processes is beyond the scope of this short analysis, a snapshot of this process can be seen within Waaseya'sin's description of how participating in the harvest and production of maple syrup at Gitigaa-Migize's house informs and supports the development of confident, culturally-rooted Anishinabe children and adults. She notes:

One of the greatest moments for me in the last spring - doing the [maple syrup] harvest here - was the kids were back in the bush, they went on the trail themselves, back on the road, and they were not afraid to be in the bush. They felt this was home, right. They knew the trail; they knew the land; they knew the trees. And the other thing is being outside in the rain, and the wind and the cold, to me that's also being anti-colonial, that's being

decolonized, when we no longer say 'Oh, it's too wet and cold out there, we can't do it', right. It's like 'We're still doing it! It don't matter!'⁵

Being on the land not only fosters Anishinabe identity, but it also reveals our responsibilities that must be met. In some cases it is bad weather that might otherwise deter us from meeting those responsibilities, but colonial authority can also be a deterrent that we can transcend by fully embodying our teachings such as *gidakiiminaan*. Nonetheless, fulfilling those responsibilities despite impediments is a powerful anti-colonial teaching, as our lands are waiting to hear from us even though they are currently occupied by settler society.

Presencing thus is part of the resurgence of our sovereignty in the way that Patricia Monture-Angus (1999) has defined it. She argues that Indigenous sovereignty is really our right to be responsible and accountable to the lands that support us (35-6). This type of sovereignty is not about control of land, but, as Vine Deloria Jr. (1994) discusses within the context of ceremonies, fulfilling our responsibilities to the land is a way for Creation to fully know itself (276-7), because *we are Creation too*. As I understand it, we are not in a relationship with Creation but manifest Creation along with the totality of other beings within it. As such, we carry responsibilities to the rest of Creation that inevitably, within a colonial context, place us in front of authorities who seek to maintain control of our lands. This is interpreted as resistance or dissent, but these are incidental when such actions are conceptualized within the concept of *gidakiiminaan*, where presence is more important than applying and observing Lockean notions of property.

⁵ Waaseya'sin. Waawshkigaamagki. 17 June 2011.

Presence is imperative within a biskaabiiyang framework because we literally and physically become the resurgence of Anishinabe-Inaadizwin. When we are present in our ecologies and fulfilling our responsibilities there, our bodies re-align with the land. Whereas modern Eurocentric notions of the self perpetuate the notion that the individual exists without observing responsibilities to place, Anishinabek notions of relationship reveal that we literally are the land in human form, no different in value than other expressions of land, be they trees, animals, etc. By becoming the land as a process of resurgence - literally shedding for periods of time the cognitive imperialism we carry as a result of colonialism (e.g. Betasamosake 2011, 96) - we resist colonialism because no longer do we believe we are not allowed to be on our lands. This, to me, is what resurgence is all about.